



# General Assembly

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## Human Rights Council

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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

## **Revised written statement\* submitted by International Eurasia Press Fund, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[20 January 2020]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

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## **Cultural and religious heritage destruction in conflict zones**

The problem of preserving cultural monuments and architectural attractions in conflict zones has been one of the most pressing for several decades. The destruction of cultural property is a serious violation of all international norms and standards. However, the number of cases when cultural heritage and personal property are being brutally destroyed or subjected to acts of vandalism, especially in conflict zones, is constantly growing.

Since the 1980s, there has been an exacerbation of armed conflicts in the world. Later, the collapse of the Soviet Union was accompanied by the emergence of a number of conflicts in the post-Soviet space, in particular in Nagorno-Karabakh region.

There are several cases when the cultural heritage is in danger: the first can be noticed during the period of hostilities, the second is the destruction of the historical heritage of individual nations by various extremist and terrorist groups, and the third, most terrible, when the states themselves decide to contribute to the destruction of historical values on the territory they occupied in order to rewrite the history and put it in the light they need.

As early as 1954, under the auspices of UNESCO, the Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict was adopted. On March 24, 2017, the UN Security Council unanimously adopted the first ever resolution 2347 on the protection of cultural heritage, emphasizing that the illegal destruction of cultural heritage, as well as the looting and illegal export of cultural property in the event of armed conflict, especially by terrorist groups, and attempts to deny historical roots and cultural diversity in this context can fuel and aggravate conflicts and impede post-conflict national reconciliation, thereby undermining security and stability, governance, social, economic and cultural development of the affected states.

Prior to this, on October 6, 2016, the Human Rights Council unanimously adopted resolution (A/HRC/ RES/33/20) “Cultural rights and the protection of cultural heritage”, Noting that the destruction of or damage to cultural heritage may have a detrimental and irreversible impact on the enjoyment of cultural rights, in particular the right of everyone to take part in cultural life, including the ability to access and enjoy cultural heritage, strongly condemning all acts of unlawful destruction of cultural heritage, which are often committed during or in the aftermath of armed conflicts around the world, acknowledging the importance of early restoration of the full enjoyment of cultural rights to individuals affected by conflict, and in particular to those who are displaced, and urging all parties to armed conflicts to refrain from any unlawful military use or targeting of cultural property, in full conformity with their obligations under international humanitarian law.

The problem is not only in the destruction of cultural objects, but also in the violation of the property rights in an occupied territory. Hundreds of thousands of refugees and IDPs were forced to flee their homes. Taking the most necessary things people leave their homes and their property. Subsequently, their houses are either being occupied by others or simply destroyed. History knows few examples when, after the end of the conflict, people were able to return to their native land and again settle in their houses. It is worth considering that losing property in wartime and leaving their homes; in the most cases people do not get any compensation.

International Eurasia Press Fund (IEPF) is international Non-Governmental Organization established in 1992, with the logo “Peace at Home, Peace in the Country, Peace in the World” and with the long term objective to support global peace making, equal and sustainable development. Since the time of establishment, the IEPF has spread its geographical activity on Post-Soviet, Asian and European states; managed good collaboration with the UN entities, the US State Department, the European Commission, the International Press Institute, the International Peace Bureau, different foreign diplomatic missions and international organizations situated in Azerbaijan, governmental and non-governmental structures. In partnership, the IEPF work on realization of different humanitarian, social, media and education projects aimed to support the vulnerable parts of the population, especially women and children, landmine victims, refugees and IDPs from the war-affected regions, ensure their integration into society, empowerment and equality. In addition, the organization is trying to draw global attention to the perpetrated acts of vandalism and the destruction of cultural

heritage in conflict zones by filming documentaries and conveying the truth to the public. Presently, the IEPF works in five key directions: Media & Civil Society Development; Peace-making & Conflict Resolution; Community Development; Refugees/IDPs Issues; and Education.

We believe that the problem of deliberate destruction of cultural heritage only intensifies year after year, despite existing conventions and resolutions. Conflicts in more than 50 countries of the world, the emergence of more than 65 million refugees and IDPs, increase the number of the cases with cultural/religious heritage and property destruction. This situation requires immediate and more decisive steps to be taken by the states and international organizations, civil rights activists and experts to strengthen the protection of cultural heritage in accordance with the international treaties and customary international law.

Azerbaijan is a part of many international conventions and committees involved in the protection of historical monuments, while also being one of the countries facing the problem of occupation almost 20% of its territory by neighboring Armenia since the beginning of the 90s. Until now, cultural monuments, property, religious sites continue to be destroyed on the occupied territories of Azerbaijan.

Today, more than 1.2 million refugees and IDPs live in Azerbaijan. Only in 1989, almost 300,000 Azerbaijanis were forcibly deported from Armenia. Considering the fact that today Azerbaijani population reached 10 million people, the number of refugees and IDPs for 1 single person is much bigger in comparison with other countries. In the occupied territories of Azerbaijan more than 900 settlements and 150,000 apartments with a total area of 9.1 million m<sup>2</sup>, 4,366 social and cultural facilities, 7,000 public buildings, 2,389 industrial and agricultural facilities, 1,025 schools, 855 kindergartens, 4 sanatorium-resort complexes, 798 medical institutions, 927 libraries, 1,510 cultural institutions, 598 communication facilities, more than 40,000 museum exhibits were destroyed. The right to property, right to live in peaceful and sustainable conditions of more than million people was seriously violated. The devastation of the occupied regions, damaging agriculture, infrastructure, industry and historic treasures must be stopped as fast as possible to restore the peaceful re-establishment of law and order. The international community has to pay more attention to this situation which has been continuing almost 30 years. Despite four resolutions of the UN Security Council (822, 853, 874 and 884), which require the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Armenian Armed Forces from Azerbaijani territories, Armenia ignores all resolutions that is a key point for settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and accordingly, further sustainable and equal development of the South Caucasus region.

After completing the ethnic cleansing, Armenia started to eliminate all traces of the existence of Azerbaijanis in these lands. Armenia destroyed a total of 1,891 material and cultural monuments, including 738 historical monuments, 28 museums with more than 83,500 exhibits, 4 photo galleries, 14 memorial complexes and 1.107 cultural facilities on the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Moreover, a mosque complex dating back to the 17th century in Jabrayil, the Upper and Lower Govheraga and Saatli mosques of the 18th century in the city of Shusha and the Aghdam mosque of the XIX century were robbed and plundered, and turned into an object of insults. Archaeological monuments such as Vaqif's Mausoleum, Natavan's House, Caravanserai were destroyed and plundered in Shusha. The property of the Albanian Christian churches located in occupied Khojaly, Kalbajar, Lachin, Khojavand and other districts which did not have any connections with the Armenian church was misappropriated and the architectural features were changed and presented as Armenian monuments. Gannesar and Hvivan Albanian Christian churches belonging to the Middle Ages, which are located in Kalbajar region, should be especially mentioned. Since 2003, illegal archaeological excavations have been carried out in the Azykh cave and around Agdam.

The same fate befell the cultural heritage of Azerbaijani people in Armenian territory. The Demirbulag Mosque in Yerevan was erased from the ground and the Blue Mosque was "renovated" to replace the original features. The ruined architectural monuments include Haji Novruzalibey mosque, "Sardar palace" or "Khan's palace" built by Kara Seyid, the Sardar Mosque in Yerevan also suffered a systematic destruction and was completely destroyed in 2014.

The worst thing is that sometimes even the cemeteries are being exposed to vandalism. Several cemeteries were destroyed or subjected to acts of vandalism by Armenia on the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. Tombstones and monuments were shot with particular cruelty.

Although crimes against cultural objects are difficult to compare in severity with crimes that are committed against people during armed conflicts, the world's special attention to cases of destruction of cultural heritage leaves the hope that cultural monuments will be better protected in the future.

In conclusion, the IEPF urges the Human Rights Council to pay close attention to the situation of the destruction of cultural heritage and property elements, also on the occupied territories of Azerbaijan. The world community must finally fully recognize the importance of preserving historical sites in the process of conflict resolution.

We urge the international community to join forces on the protection of historic, cultural and religious heritage. It is necessary to combine all efforts and help countries secure their facilities, which, obviously, is a part of their culture, history and identity. It is important to raise international awareness about the cases of heritage destruction for a better response.

We call on the international community, including the United Nations, international organizations, non-governmental and state institutions, to take immediate measures to bring to justice Armenia, which, using the armed forces, not only occupied the territory of a sovereign state, but continues to destroy the cultural heritage and the properties on the occupied territories.

We also call on the Human Rights Council to address this important issue of the annexation of the property of thousands of refugees and IDPs who were forced to leave their homes for about 30 years.

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